Faculty Constructions of Internationalization: Practice and Perception in Omani Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the growing scholarship on internationalization of higher education, particularly in non-Western contexts. Literature in non-Western contexts highlights tensions around adopting approaches seen as 'global standard' where these reflect inequalities of power and prestige, shaped by coloniality. Drawing on conclusions from a policy document analysis, this study is based on a thematic analysis of interviews with 10 academic staff members within one college. This study explored how academics and leaders conceptualised internationalisation, and how they related these conceptualisations to their pedagogical practices in courses, interpreting their responses through a decolonial frame. Faculty expressed positivity towards internationalization in general and commitment to specific aspects such as global employability and competence. However, they also identified tensions, such as the prioritization of English over Arabic, lower value being placed on local forms of knowledge, reliance on globalized curricula and materials, and so on. These speak to implicit understandings of latent coloniality in institutional approaches to internationalization in Oman. These findings have wider relevance to other Arab Gulf countries, as well as to other non-Anglophone countries in the process of internationalizing.

Keywords: internationalisation, curriculum, practice, perceptions, pedagogy, teaching, international

Introduction

While Western institutions have dominated discourse and research related to internationalization, recent studies have called for more critical, contextualized, and varied global perspectives (Stein, 2017; Knight, 2004). iThis includes critique of neo-imperialistic and neoliberal economic paradigms dominating in policy and practice, particularly when imposing external standards and paradigms (Le Grange, 2018; Altbach & Knight, 2007). Literature in non-Western contexts highlights tensions around adopting approaches seen as 'global standard' where these reflect inequalities of power and prestige (Mignolo, 2011; Behari-Leak, 2019). Decolonial approaches frame these inequalities as part of a historical legacy begun during colonialism and perpetuated through ideological regimes that centre the 'West' as normative (Mignolo, 2011). This scholarship illustrates how the colonial matrix of power (Quijano, 2007) operates through contemporary internationalization. However, empirical evidence from the Gulf region remains limited, with few in-depth qualitative studies of institutional dynamics and stakeholder perspectives of internationalization at the micro-level. Given that several

Arab Gulf countries, including UAE and Qatar, aim to establish themselves as regional hubs for transnational and international education, this limitation is significant to the field (Al-Atari, 2016).

Based on a doctoral research project, this paper helps address this gap through analysis of academic staff views at a leading Omani university. It provides an empirical basis for debates on navigating tensions between global competitiveness and local identity in internationalizing higher education in Oman. The insights on faculty enactment of institutional internationalization policies also advances understanding of how policy intents translate into classroom practice at the micro-level.

Drawing on conclusions from a policy document analysis (Al Furqani, forthcoming), this study is based on a thematic analysis of interviews with 10 academic staff members within one college. This study explored how academics and leaders conceptualised internationalisation, and how they related these conceptualisations to their pedagogical practices in courses.

Literature Review

Internationalization has not been a static concept , despite reliance on Jane Knight's 2003 definition as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (p.2). As de Wit et al. (2015) highlight, it has rather become a broad umbrella term for all wider global engagement, encompassing student and staff mobility, as well as global citizenship concerns "Internationalisation at Home" emerged in 2001, as a term used to cover internationally related activity going beyond mobility and embracing cultural diversity (Beelen & Jones, 2015). "Internationalization of Curricula", reviewing the materials with which students interact and how they're taught to develop internationalist perspectives and intercultural competence, is taken to be a broader concept (Garza, 2019; Hudzik, 2011; Huitt, 2013). Indeed Jos Beelen (2019) argues the distinction has fallen away or become meaningless as all internationalisation "starts with" the curriculum; although, given the continued and in some areas increasing importance of academic structures, governance and administration, this argument only holds in certain contexts (Cheng, 2019; Ourania & Witte, 2019). Yet most of these framings continue to rely on nationalist assumptions, the idea that internationalization means bringing the global or exotic into the other national container, which is otherwise parochial or self-referential (Marginson, 2023). Within the extensive literature base on internationalization in higher education, there are several strands of critique focusing on issues such as neocolonialism and what are termed deficit narratives (Bamberger et al., 2019; Author 2, forthcoming; Majee & Ress, 2020).

More recently, the term "critical internationalization studies" has become prominent in the literature base, as a term encompassing the scrutiny of the underlying assumptions, power dynamics, and impacts of mainstream internationalization practices in higher education, challenging their often-unexamined neoliberal and neocolonial underpinnings (Stein, 2021; Stein et al., 2016). This field emphasizes the importance of reflexivity, social justice, and the decolonization of knowledge and practices in international education (Andreotti, 2011). This branch of internationalization studies is rooted in postcolonial and decolonial scholarship, drawing on the ideas of philosophers such as Hegel and Said. Hegel's concept of the "Other" informs the way postcolonial scholars examine the relationship between colonizer and colonized (Brons, 2015; Canales, 2000; Jensen, 2011). Said's concept of Orientalism informs the way postcolonial scholars analyse the representation of colonized people in Western discourse, extending Said's original literary analysis into media and education. Said also argues that this process of "Othering" the East, or constructing it as fundamentally different and inferior to the West, is both a matter of scholarly inquiry, and deeply embedded in cultural, political and economic structures (Mani & Frankenberg, 1985; Pasha, 2005; Prakash, 1995; Said, 1978, 2014). This centrality and analysis of culture has been embedded in postcolonial and decolonial scholarship of internationalization in higher education (Pashby, 2020; Behari-Leak, 2019; Ocholla, 2020) and such 'Othering' underpins deficit narratives that frame particular countries, cultures, or marginalised groups, such as international students, as lacking something with reference to the normative 'West'. Quijano (2007) further explains that coloniality (i.e. the system of thought attached to both historic colonialism and contemporary neocolonialism) entails the repression of modes of knowing, delegitimising all save the epistemic models of the colonizers.

This phenomenon is termed epistemicide—the systematic undermining or erasure of certain forms of knowledge, particularly those from non-Western or indigenous cultures. Global education, as advocated by hegemonic forms of internationalization, is shaped by colonial histories and neoliberal agendas, marginalizing and suppressing diverse epistemologies (Mignolo, 2011; Santos, 2015). As a practice of global higher education, internationalization reveals dynamics and effects that can be understood through decolonial lenses. As Marginson (2023) points out, relations of coloniality are fundamental to the practices and structures of internationalization. This enables authors to actively re-imagine internationalization in a way that is more inclusive, equitable, and respectful of a plurality of knowledges and experiences (Hall & Tandon, 2017; Paraskeva, 2016). More broadly, decolonial scholarship on education and internationalization works to expose and address past inequalities and injustices, and to challenge the hegemony of Western knowledge, pedagogical practices, and research agendas (Breit et al., 2013; Du Preez, 2018; Marginson, 2022; Thondhlana et al., 2021; Wimpenny

et al., 2021). A decolonial internationalization would therefore be a model of relations in higher education based on equal respect and reciprocity (Marginson, 2023). It would also likely entail a move away from universality into the 'pluriversity', towards multiple co-existing epistemologies through contextualised knowledge that recognises the unequal division of intellectual and academic labour and resource (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021).

Lecturers are a group of stakeholders that are arguably most affected by internationalization policies, and they are also responsible for the systemic and planned integration of international and intercultural strategies into the curriculum (Leask & Carroll, 2011). Studies of staff concepts of internationalization often find that internationalization is perceived as a top-down initiative imposed by the management of an institution (Barton et al., 1994; Zou et al., 2020). Kirk et al. (2018) found that internationalization strategies are often perceived to serve the economic interests of universities rather than the ideals of global citizenship that are used to justify them rhetorically; a frame of resistance-to the imposition of internationalization (Ghazarian, 2020). Other studies focus upon awareness of internationalization, as well as how institutional and disciplinary pedagogies, language use, organizational context and personal experiences each shape individual concepts of internationalization (Almeida et al., 2019; Leask & Bridge, 2013; Radjai & Hammond, 2019; S.-M. Renfors, 2021). Even in situations where awareness is found to be high, with relatively coherent concepts across an institutional context, and there is no apparent lack of willingness, implementation still varies due to institutional and national factors (Mertova, 2012; S. M. Renfors, 2019; Robson et al., 2018).Therefore, if we are to understand how internationalization is conceived and practiced, local studies are necessary.

Literature on internationalization in the Arabic-Islamic World is sparse, considering the size of the higher education sector and its growth over recent years (Al-Agtash & Khadra, 2019). In general, the justifications for the significance of internationalization often align with themes commonly found in Western literature, for instance Zgheib & Van Loan (2021, p. 94) note that internationalization may contribute to "undo stereotypes and promote cross-cultural learning, moving students from entrenched parochialism into an international worldview". Others focus on skill development. While this may be a rationale for internationalization in other contexts, it is a critical necessity for a region that has been heavily dependent on expatriates to fill many skilled positions in recent years (Bensaid & Brahimi, 2021). The challenge of mobility has made it difficult, but in conjunction with the shared cultures across the Muslim world, Khaleed & Ali (2020) propose that internationalization within this sphere, especially through partnerships with other Muslim institutions, presents a workable approach for Muslim students who have traditionally not been highly mobile. According to Al Atari, the most pressing question concerning internationalization in the Arab context is this: "How to be internationalized without being de-regionalized and de-nationalized (or de-contextualized)?" (Al-Atari, 2016, p. 6).

Omani Internationalization in Context

This question is particularly pertinent to the Omani context. Oman's journey in higher education reflects its unique geographical and cultural context. While the nation itself has never been colonized and is the oldest independent country in the Arab world (Gonzalez, 2008), two extended periods of partial suppression left their mark. The first under the Portuguese ran from the 1507 occupation of Muscat through to its liberation in 1650. Following this liberation, the Omani Empire adopted the Portuguese model and adapted it to their own needs, taking control over key trade routes and establishing themselves as a renowned naval and diplomatic power in the region. However, their influence waned as the British East India Company's grew (MacDougall, 2017). A series of treaties between Oman and Britain throughout the 19th century, although seemingly between peers, then essentially transformed Oman into a British protectorate. In exchange for military protection, Britain gained significant influence over Oman's foreign affairs (Onley, 2005, 2009). As Omans's economy weakened and pre-existing internal tensions rose, its trade and diplomatic network broke down and it became an increasingly isolated country. The discovery of oil in the region in the early 20th century further increased British interest in maintaining influence in and stability of Oman (Onley, 2009).

It was not until the rise of Sultan Qaboos bin Said in 1970, decades after the discovery of oil, that the country began to develop a modern-style institutional education system. The era of Sultan Qaboos, who received his education in England and came to power with a take-over tacitly supported by the British (Bradshaw & Curtis, 2023), marked a significant turning point, initiating extensive modernization across all sectors, including education, funded by the extraction of oil and gas. This modernisation relied mostly on expatriate labour, which was involved not only within governmental circles but also among the higher paid jobs throughout the economy. An education system was built from scratch; first primary facilities were established, then secondary, and finally in 1986 the first institute of higher education, SQU. SQU symbolizes the peak of Oman's educational renaissance. As the country's first public university, it became a central figure in Oman's educational landscape. SQU was not just an educational institution but a representation of Oman's aspirations for a modern, knowledge-based society (Gonzalez, 2008).

The establishment of further higher education institutions was prioritized to reduce reliance on expatriate labour, diversify the economy, and improve living standards. Langthaler, Wolf, and Schnitzler (2022) highlight the ongoing

necessity for cultivating local skills in Oman. This need becomes particularly crucial given the context of diminishing oil reserves and the shift from a rentier state heavily dependent on expatriate labor to one that prioritizes local employment in the private sector. The decades that followed the establishment of SQU in 1986 saw the proliferation of higher education institutions. In 2009, there were 80,000 students in the higher education system. In 2020, there were 160,000 (National Centre for Statistics & Information, 2021). Through this period, new institutions were mostly private, and obligated to partner with foreign universities (Ameen et al., 2010). This is not the only way in which Omani higher education drew on foreign expertise, particularly from Western nations (Donn & Al Manthri, 2010). This influence is evident in the curriculum, teaching methods, and administrative structures of Omani higher education institutions. The use of English in higher education, for example, is seen as an essential tool of individual and national development, and a means of attaining national business opportunities (Al-Lamki, 2009).

Collaboration with Western universities was intended to raise educational standards and align them with international benchmarks. In the case of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), the only national university in Oman, over ten different external accreditation bodies (established by the institution) are involved, with plans in place to expand this portfolio. The problem of economic diversification remained; solutions included the introduction of quality assurance measures and accreditation processes, modelled largely after Western standards; and the internationalization of the higher education curriculum, largely in collaboration with Western universities. These are actions that clearly illustrate Oman's policy of borrowing; all aimed at enhancing the quality and standards of Omani higher education, as well as the competence and competitiveness of Omani graduates in the national, regional, and global markets (Al'Abri, 2016). Largely, literature has chronicled this borrowing and its implementation on a practical level (Brandenburg, 2012; Bensaid & Brahimi, 2021; Albusaidi, 2020) there is no existent decolonial critique. It is notable that despite this effort to appeal to and meet international standards, the number of international students coming to Oman remains low: of entrants to higher education in Oman in 2021, only 2% were non-Omani (National Centre for Statistics & Information, 2021).

There is a stated aim in national policy in Oman "to promote the importance of the Omani identity" (Oman Vision 2040, n.d.). Yet, the tension between the internationalist teaching outlined in SQU and CEPS's strategic documents and Omani identity remains unaddressed (Al Furqani, forthcoming). This mirrors a broader pattern in the region's higher education sector: there are many words in strategic documents to the effect of encouraging a unique regionalized Arab education system and calls for the GCC to become leaders in the creation of a new (humanistic rather than utilitarian) education system (Al-Atari, 2016; Badry & Willoughby, 2016). Yet in practice, it is the Western education model which remains dominant as the sector has expanded, with the consequent tensions remaining unaddressed (Bensaid & Brahimi, 2021).

There is limited scholarly research on the internationalization of higher education in Oman, and none that we have identified adopting a decolonial approach. Al-Shikaili (2019) delves into the role of international partnerships and teaching quality assurance in private institutions, while Al-Waail (2020) uniquely examines SQU's role in reflecting Oman's foreign policy in the internationalization of higher education. Similarly, Brandenburg (2012) discussed SQU's internal policy-making, and highlighted the influence of British and American models. Albusaidi (2020) explores the widespread use of English in Omani higher education institutions, analyzing the impact of English as a Medium of Instruction and globalization on the sector through the lenses of World Systems Theory and Dependency Theory. Of the literature on internationalization in Omani HE, only Al Abry (2018) focuses on staff perceptions, specifically within Transnational Higher Education, in his case solely in private higher education institutions. Al Abry reveals a general satisfaction but also pinpoints areas of concern such as financial constraints, socio-cultural challenges, and communication issues among key stakeholders. Some of these concerns are practical, others drawing more explicitly on the decolonial scholarship outlined above hint at cultural tensions which have emerged through the widespread adoption of Western models in Omani HE. However, none of these previous studies have explored how staff conceptualise and seek to bring about internationalization, reflecting a wider lack of scholarship in GCC literature and practice. The interconnected histories and contemporary realities of GCC states like Oman, located at the junction of Asian and Middle Eastern spheres of influence, emphasize the importance of understanding the unique characteristics of the region within higher education research (Teferra, 2013). As Kinoshita and Okamoto note, institutions in non-Western contexts "face different challenges or issues surrounding internationalization" compared to Western establishments where most literature has focused (2021, p. 152). GCC states have common historical roots to the Ottoman empire and experiences of European colonial influence that continue to have an impact on their modern tertiary education systems (Owen, 2004). Region-wide factors like the expansion of private education affiliated with Western institutions (Wilkins, 2011), shifts towards English as medium of instruction (Dearden, 2015), and reliance on expatriate labour (Brewer, 2007) have shaped common policy directions. Previous studies on mobility, branch campuses and the labour market have all found similarities between different Gulf nations (Al-Agtash & Khadra, 2019; Bensaid & Brahimi, 2021). Conceptualizations of internationalization would likely also be broadly similar; as would staff tendencies to push back and prefer a more humanistic, rather than utilitarian, approach to education (Badry & Willoughby, 2016).

This paper focuses on staff perceptions in a single college within SQU, recognizing that lecturers are ultimately responsible for using of international and intercultural strategies into the curriculum (Leask & Carroll, 2011). The concepts they hold of internationalization are one key factor in how they realise internationalization in their pedagogy (Foster & Carver, 2018). To investigate the interplay between staff conceptualization, and pedagogy, this paper investigates "how academic staff in the College of Economics and Political Science (SQU) conceptualize internationalization in Higher Education, and how this shapes their pedagogy." Through the investigation of this question, we will see the tensions between the Western conceptualization of internationalization which predominates in Omani HE policy, and the concepts and practices of individual academic instructors.

Methodology

Based on a constructivist research paradigm, this project undertook a qualitative case study of SQU, specifically the College of Economics and Political Science, to understand the unique ways in which internationalization is construed and constructed within this specific academic setting. As an employee of this institution, though not of the College, Author 1 has been closely immersed in the multi-layered policy context and staff experience.

Qualitative case studies manifest two pivotal strengths: particularism and thick description (Merriam, 1998). This study therefore took SQU as a particular site, with unique characteristics, and aimed to generate thick description through document analysis, to provide institutional lenses, and staff interviews to generate a grounded perspective of how internationalisation is enacted within classrooms. SQU is recognized as the Omani university with the most significant international exposure. CEPS has been selected as the focus of this study because it is the sole college within the university dedicated to humanitarian studies that possesses a clearly documented Internationalization Policy on its website, marking it as the college most committed to internationalization.

The study is based on the Progressive Focusing (Parlett and Hamilton, 1972) approach for data collection, which is carried out in interconnected phases. Data collection in such a research process is about contextualising the theory and data. As such, it is a flexible, fluid and seamless process. The Progressive Focusing approach delivers the prospect of comparing theory with empirical data, which is its main advantage (Stake, 2010). The study was initiated with a focused framework, questions and methodology derived from the literature. Modifications to provisional plans were based on the data collected in each phase to inform the subsequent phase.

The first phase of data collection involved compiling all internationalisation-related documents at three levels: within the School CEPS, through the institution of SQU, and at national level in Oman. This involved snowballing techniques and thorough research to identify documents not publicly available. Initial inductive thematic analysis highlighted key themes in relation to quality, benchmarking, and results of this study are reported in Al Furqani (forthcoming). This also involved stakeholder conversations.

The second phase of data collection, conducted during the 2021 COVID-19 lockdowns and travel bans, relied on online semi-structured interviews, which form the basis for this paper. Most participants, as well as the research team, were accustomed to engaging in online video settings. Online interviews were also deemed the most ethical choice given concerns about potential COVID-19 exposure, and proved to be effective in this study.. The data collection was managed by the principal investigator, who occupied an insider/outsider role in the institution, as an SQU member of staff, but not a member of the CEPS, and current PhD researcher outside the country. This dual role lent valuable knowledge in terms of institutional structures, yet enabled an outsider's perspective to be adopted during interviews.

The 10 participants interviewed for this study were all Omani nationals. All participants were involved in teaching business courses at the undergraduate or graduate level at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). The participants all held a PhD and studied abroad for their graduate degrees, in English-speaking Western countries like the UK, US and Australia, fully funded by Omani scholarships intended to internationalize the staff of SQU and the elite of Oman more generally. Their teaching experiences after their doctoral education ranged from 3 years to over 25 years, with an average of 13 years. While the participants had many commonalities, their individual trajectories were expected to shape their perspectives on internationalization. For example, some were more established academics while others were early-career lecturers. All had studied abroad, but the length and depth of their experiences in international contexts varied. Their positions at SQU also differed, with some holding leadership roles related to internationalization initiatives. As such, the researcher expected that their varied contexts might shape the perspectives they held.

Interview questions were formulated to be open-ended, exploratory, and layered. They were structured to elicit both descriptive and reflective responses, targeting various facets of internationalization in higher education, from conceptual understandings to pedagogical implications, and informed by the analysis of the policy documents analysed. Clarifications and interpretations were sought throughout.

Recordings were processed through Zoom to auto-generate verbatim transcripts. All participant names were removed to safeguard individual identities, and transcripts were reviewed for clarity and accuracy. Here, we report quotes

using participant numbers to help obscure individual identities. We have retained the real name of the college and university, however, considering that they would be easily identified by the contextual information needed to interpret findings with any validity. All sensitive or potentially identifying information shared in the context of the interviews has been redacted.

Using qualitative data analysis software (Atlas.ti), from inductive coding (Saldaña, 2016), reflexive thematic analysis was conducted (Clarke and Braun, 2013). The method aims to identify nuanced patterns of meaning across a data set, informed by the researchers own reflexivity. A reflexive journal was kept to acknowledge and interrogate the first author's role, assumptions, and influence on the analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Coding practices and key examples were shared periodically with the research team to enhance reliability.Thematic maps were developed at specific stages of the analytical process. These maps served as a dynamic and evolving representation of the identified themes, capturing the relational and hierarchical structure. Sense-checking of analysis was conducted with wider institutional stakeholders.

Results and Discussion: Internationalization in Tension

Definitions of internationalization given by staff centred upon taking ideas and frameworks from international contexts and adapting them for use in Oman and specifically within CEPS, to give students skills associated with being a "global graduate". As illustrative examples, Participant 1 described obtaining ideas for active learning techniques at international conferences and then modifying them for use in their classroom. Participant 3 recalled being at "Leiden University, Rotterdam University, and … really intrigued by what they call problem-based learning." These show the impact of international pedagogy on how participants taught within CEPS. Participants presented the apparent aim of this style of teaching, and of internationalization, as the creation of "global graduates" equipped with both professional and personal competencies. Importantly, they should be interculturally competent and flexible, able to apply "whatever he or she learned in the classroom, in any organization, whether this organization is in Oman or outside Oman" (P8). Internationalization thus focuses on personal attributes which enable this global outlook, which should be prioritized because "if you are not equipped with those personal attributes, you wouldn't be able to be professionally equipped or fit in the working environment" (P2).

A broad commonality between participants was the regular occupation of a pragmatic middle ground in assessing internationalization efforts, recognizing both advantages and drawbacks. Participant 4 valued aligning with global standards but critiqued partnerships that lack meaningful exchanges. Participant 7 saw benefits in student experiences abroad but noted that financial barriers limit access. Participant 4 for instance critiqued the focus on "collaboration with other universities" rather than "curriculum-based internationalisation and student experience." These balanced and nuanced perspectives characterize a general mentality of critically evaluating policies in action, rather than accepting or rejecting them outright. Indeed, the complexity of their overall perspectives aligns with research showing academics take a more reflective stance on internationalization policy aims versus administrators (Buckner & Stein, 2020).

As part of this reflective stance, staff also held counter-narratives to the generally positive conception of internationalization. While they recognized the benefits of international standards, collaborations, and student experiences abroad, some critiqued the underlying motivations as being driven by competition and reputation rather than educational quality per se. According to these, accreditation is "the game of the international community" (P3) aimed at giving SQU a "global name and brand" (P10) to attract investment and compete in rankings, which favour Western universities. Despite these reservations, most staff agreed accreditation had positively impacted teaching and students through exposure to higher expectations and global mobility.

Emulating the West: benchmarks, exposure, English and textbooks

The idea of emulating the West has been central in the development of teaching at CEPS, mediated through Benchmarking. Benchmarking was described by staff, especially in its early stages, as heavily inclined towards American and, to a lesser extent, Western curricula. Participant 6 was actively involved as a translator between international standards and the college-level curricular setup: "we picked accredited universities in the United States, a couple of universities in Australia, one university within the region within the Middle East. So altogether, we had 20." Hence "The curriculum of the college was modelled after a typical American business school." (P10) While participants recognized that benchmarking against high-ranking international institutions elevates standards, the implicit message is that American or Western standards are inherently superior, which subtly perpetuates epistemicide by erasing or marginalizing indigenous Omani or regional educational traditions and practices (De Wit & Altbach, 2021; Thondhlana et al., 2021). This benchmarking process, in essence, represents a form of neo-imperialism: the imposition of Western pedagogical structures onto Omani educational institutions (Ghani et al., 2022). Even the subsequent diversification of benchmarking towards other global institutions, as described by the participants, leans heavily towards the West, perpetuating the same concern.

Staff Diversity

Staff diversity at SQU is a fact of life and policy objective, and although recently there has been a turn towards Omanisation at a national level, it is not referred to in SQU policies (Al Furqani, forthcoming). Participant 6 notes that they are part of a very diverse department, with international faculty members constituting about 80% of the staff. Participant 8 describes their department as dynamic, with people constantly coming in and out, contributing to that diversity. However, they noted "you can find one department which is totally all Omanis, almost the same age" and noted that diversity varied considerably on a departmental basis. When speaking about the university as a whole, academics considered staff diversity to be adequate, but some participants argue there would be benefits to a greater proportion of Western staff. While staff diversity at SQU is celebrated, there's an undertone of hierarchy in the preferences—wanting more Western staff, which implies a certain hierarchy in valuing international faculty based on origin. Is there an implicit assumption that these staff bring "better" or "more global" perspectives? This unintentionally conveys the idea of superiority of specific nationalities and cultures, thereby sustaining comparable colonial perceptions. A similar narrative on a global scale underpins the reason given for a lack of Western students studying in the Middle East: cultural barriers (as well as financial) and the consequent under-ranking of Omani universities compared to European/American counterparts (Kosmützky & Putty, 2016).

Prioritizing English

The prioritization of English as the primary language of instruction acts similarly as both a tool of internationalization and a potential agent of cultural erosion. Participant 1 believes that English is best for instruction because "having a strong or very good English, spoken and written, really helps in meeting that international standardization or standards in education." Similarly, P5 believes that English is "commonly used all over the world … Even if you go to Europe, they speak German or Spanish, but still, they can understand English." The business school is "effectively international because teaching is done mostly in English" and students "automatically gain that extra language besides the Arabic" (P4). While it may facilitate wider communication, it risks the decrease of Arabic language proficiency among students and further alienates them from their cultural roots (Du Preez, 2018; Thondhlana et al., 2021). Three participants would clearly prefer a greater use of Arabic within SQU, and not just for the practical reason that some incoming students find English hard. Participant 2 believes that "our mother's tongue should be used in our education". This was tied to the development of Omani identity; "English can be an obstacle" hindering one's ability to understand their own culture and identity and "represent Oman". Participant 4 echoed these sentiments, adding that they believe it is better to "think critically in one's language". Again, this speaks to decolonial concerns about the profound connection between language, culture, and epistemology (Wa Thiong'o, 1992).

International Curriculum Materials

The use of international textbooks was considered more problematic by staff. Participant 8 noted that "the curriculum starts with the textbook always." As some participants narrated, international textbooks provide global case studies, resources, and alignment with curricula worldwide; this is internationalization in action (P3, P5, P8, P10). However, many staff critiqued the Western, and particularly American, focus of these materials as limiting applicability in the Omani context, emphasizing that they did extra work themselves to incorporate the Omani context. The staff here are in alignment with the literature arguing internationalization should balance local relevance with global perspectives (Altbach & Knight, 2007). While not using the language of decoloniality explicitly, staff raised many concerns which echo decolonial critiques. For instance, the Arabized version of Harvard Business Review was referred to as a "gloss over" as the refers to the "same research" as the "US and Europe" (P4); the Arab cases are not viewed as authentic. Participant 7 was the most clearly critical, stating that they have "this Arab world edition, which I don't like at all and I'm totally against them" based on the idea that American textbooks embed on American norms for "political and economic reasons - to lead the world with its culture". This argument supports a line of academic literature discussing education as soft power (Ghani et al., 2022; Author 2; Satterthwaite & Atkinson, 2005), and further exemplifies a neo-colonial mindset in Omani education. By primarily highlighting Western case studies and contexts, these textbooks not only sideline non-Western knowledge systems but also spread a specific worldview where Western values and ways of acting are positioned centrally (Yende, 2020).

Essentially, epistemicide refers to systematic erasure of indigenous knowledge systems in favour of dominant Western epistemologies. This is evident in the remarks made by the Participants about internationalisation, particularly as they underscored the over-reliance on Western models and textbooks which students often find hard to relate to. When participants emphasize the "need for local content," this can be viewed as a response to the epistemic marginalization that has characterized their experiences with Western-centric curricula. The act of "borrowing" from international curricula and the subsequent need to "customize it to fit" the local context is a clear manifestation of this epistemic tension. Neo-imperialism, as a conceptual lens, allows us to understand the structural and ideological forces that underpin this epistemic

sidelining. The global educational landscape, driven by a marketplace of ideas, often champions Western paradigms as the gold standard. SQU's, and particularly CEPS's pedagogical landscape seems no exception. Yet, there's a simultaneous pushback, a desire to reclaim and re-centre Omani values and experiences. The move to contextualize "Christmas" as "Eid Al Adha" or to substitute the "Beer Distribution Game" with the "Vimto Juice Game" viewed through this lens is perhaps not merely a superficial replacement; it is a minor act of resistance against the erasure of cultural and epistemic identities.

Pedagogy: student-centric, employability, international values and local contextualization

The interviews revealed that pedagogy at SQU, as with curricular development, is heavily influenced by Western models of education, reflecting Oman's ongoing neocolonial relationships and the desire of the Omani leadership to modernize. Faculty explicitly cite experiences studying abroad in "Western" universities as shaping their teaching philosophies towards more student-centered, critical thinking approaches. This demonstrates the continued dominance of Western epistemology (Said, 1978; Spivak, 2013) in shaping what is considered "good" pedagogy, with non-Western ways of teaching and learning rendered largely invisible in our discussion. SQU policy documents mention the use of international instructional materials, technology-enhanced learning, and student-centered pedagogy as ways to enhance educational quality and develop globally competent graduates. This aligns closely with literature that presents internationalization of the curriculum as a process of incorporating intercultural and international perspectives into course content, materials, and instructional methods (Huitt, 2013), and was largely mirrored by staff members talking about how internationalization fed through to their pedagogy.

Student-Centred Learning

Interviews revealed that staff associated active, skills-based techniques with their own international experiences and a willingness to adapt teaching to student needs. Most broadly, the pedagogic ideals that our participants had taken away from their experiences abroad focus on student-centred learning:
"Students should be in the centre of the teaching. They should also be active learners. They should be educated on how to learn themselves, instead of just being spoon-fed, as we used to be." (P5)
At the centre of most of the participants' pedagogy was practice. Participant 3 recounted a particular trip to Holland as part of an Omani award for distinguished students; and "was really intrigued by what they call problem-based learning in Rotterdam. So basically, and I was like, wow. They said, we have these students, and they work in Rotterdam ports, they work there and there, I'm like, wow, so it is education by doing" (P3). While no participants recounted creating similar work-experience pathways for their students, many used simulated practice through competitions. Participant 1 states that students "are involved in competitions, they're involved in doing their own business, they're involved in doing proposals." Other participants embed internationalization more deeply within similar practices: Participant 8 gave an example of the X-Culture Competition which is "like an international competition between our students and students from universities around the world". Guest speakers are also utilized for a similar reason, to broaden student minds. Participant 2 invites guest speakers who are "exposed to different experiences… I never ever chose someone who came from one side only, from one sector, for example, or from one job."
All staff noted ways in which they worked actively to integrate internationalization into curriculum and pedagogy, for instance by exposing students to international situations without necessitating travel, as Participants 2 and 8 did through international competitions. Participants 7 and 10 both used international classrooms; Participant 5 brought in international (mostly Western) guest speakers. This work was particularly pronounced for those with administrative responsibilities beyond the classroom. Participant 6 brought firsthand experience with internationalization from previous roles, which they leveraged as Director of a postgraduate program to provide insights on implementation at SQU. Some participants seemed to view themselves as mainly implementing institutional directives related to internationalization. Participant 5 described following guidelines for incorporating international perspectives into courses, saying "we have to consider how it's structured" based on accreditors' standards. Yet, this highlights a driver for the active integration of internationalisation. The apparent provider-receiver nature of the top-down communication on internationalization meant staff saw themselves as implementers, rather than active co-creators of the institutional vision of internationalization.

Local Knowledge

When participants make the additional effort to include more Omani and Gulf-based perspectives, they do so to make education relevant to the local context (Ocholla, 2020). However, they perceive barriers in accessing local companies and guest speakers, as compared to when they make similar efforts to engage with Western businesses. The assumption that local businesses are uncooperative when it comes to research originates from a lack of cross-cultural understanding, as

norms around knowledge sharing differ. As one example, when students want to collect data or interview business organisations "to complete part of their course requirements, they find resistance" as business organisations in Omani don't see value in giving information and are not very welcoming of research interviews in the way Westerners are perceived to be (P6).

Combined with that issue, participants note that the curriculum places a lower value on local knowledge as compared with exemplary case studies and problems from the West which better reflect the business theories being taught (Hawawini, 2016; Ohajionu, 2021). Furthermore, the extra labour required of faculty to source non-Western materials and experiences places an unnecessary burden on them as individuals, rather than the institution. According to P2, it takes "personal effort" and "a lot of time and effort" to get and edit local resources as there is no "database that has all the cases for students". Similarly, P4 doesn't "depend on university resources alone" but goes out to "find more and learn more" by engaging industry experts and the business community. Participant 5 stresses the importance of doing so, emphasising that contact through local industries benefits students: "They will start getting better consultancies from companies that need some sort of help. And they will get to know the local."

All staff members interviewed mentioned the tension between local values and internationalization, which was the most prominent silence identified in the analysis of the policy documents surrounding internationalization at CEPS, SQU and Oman. Except for a few cases, the staff emphasized the significance of preserving Omani language, culture, and values in the context of internationalization. They expressed that the current trajectory was inadequate to achieve this goal. The comparative silence in institutional documentation may stem from a predominant focus on meeting international standards and rankings to enhance the university's profile and reputation. This Western-centric approach is seen to overlook local perspectives even within the institution.

Creating Balance

The interview quotes reveal differing, and nuanced perspectives among staff on how to balance localization and internationalization. Participant 7 highlights the need for students to be aware of and accept cultural differences, while still upholding their own values and identity: "So I don't lose my identity when I accept others. And I am at peace with what others do in their own regions, you see." Participant 4 seems to view incorporating local Omani content as an important part of internationalization, stating "I don't think we should differentiate it. Because besides the cultural aspects and the national identity that adds value to the relevance of what you do at university or college and how you can contribute in society."

Furthermore, participants noted a lack of formal guidelines for incorporating international perspectives, leaving it up to individual faculty to decide how to "internationalize" their courses. "It is left to us with the trust that you will know what to do" (P7). Participant 6 stated that "there are no written guidelines". Internationalization's incorporation into classroom practices relied heavily on informal peer sharing, with staff feeling as though they were left interpreting institutional aims independently. This results in a potentially uncritical adoption of Western case studies, theories, and materials which are taken as the norm in the curriculum, as discussed above, without sufficient engagement with non-Western or local knowledge (Le Grange, 2016). Reliance on Western textbooks and examples from American/European companies presume the universality and neutrality of Eurocentric business knowledge rather than recognizing its cultural specificity (Hawawini, 2016; Moscovici, 2001). The examples from our study in which participants added local or regional examples demonstrate it is possible to critique and contextualize the Westernized business curriculum, but the default is not to do so. This serves to centre and normalize Western epistemology and business while marginalizing other worldviews.

Implications and Conclusion

Of course, a micro-study is by its nature limited and most of the findings are not generalizable without significant caveats. Yet, despite these limitations, this micro-study of a single college at a single institution offers both findings of value to educational literature and recommendations for more successfully integrating internationalization within the context of Omani higher education.

SQU faculty views reveal nuances around motivations to internationalize, with some critiquing the focus on rankings and accreditation in local and institutional policy over educational quality. In teaching, staff balance international perspectives and active learning with local contextualization. They emphasised the human elements of internationalization, prioritising collaboration, and 'exposure' to global influences.

While staff at CEPS recognize the positive impacts of accreditation and international standards on teaching, they are critical of the overemphasis on metrics and global rankings. The educators also emphasize the need for balancing international elements with local content, voicing concerns about the dominance of Western norms and the potential loss of cultural diversity. The paper highlights a concern that internationalization strategies, frequently presented as solutions for

enhancing educational quality and reputation, may inadvertently conceal the risk of epistemicide by sidelining of local knowledge.

A range of seemingly practical, yet fundamentally epistemological issues were raised, including: the lack of availability of discipline-specific textbooks from Arab or Gulf area scholars; the predominance of English language instruction; and preference being given to 'Western' staff at the recruitment level. Staff also discussed adopting 'student-centred teaching approaches' as a key element of internationalization, and often linked this to their own international education biographies. While not using the language of decoloniality, many participants raised concerns which echo those centred in decolonial scholarship. Findings also demonstrate that staff did privately push-back against the uncritical adoption of Westernised concepts of internationalisation and pedagogy, and offered specific ways in which the College might do so, but the norm was set by policymakers.

While not using the language of decoloniality, many participants raised concerns which mirror those centered in decolonial scholarship. This study's findings build on Brandenburg's (2012) observation that SQU's policymaking, particularly in terms of internationalization, is heavily influenced by Western educational models, predominantly from British and American systems. This reliance on Western precedents is similar to that found elsewhere in the world by postcolonial scholarship, which critically examines the continuation of colonial legacies through the imposition of Western academic and cultural norms (Stein, 2021; Said, 1978). The present research uncovers a palpable tension between the internationalization efforts at SQU, modelled after Western standards, and the institution's declared aim to bolster Omani identity as outlined in Oman Vision 2040.

We can therefore make a set of concrete, if broad, recommendations to institutional and national policymakers and senior leaders. Firstly, promote a balance of international curriculum content with locally relevant material. Secondly, while the motivations to focus on rankings and accreditation are unavoidable, they can be mitigated with a focus on quality of classroom teaching. Thirdly, support and promote discipline-specific textbooks to be developed by Arab and/or GCC area scholars. Fourthly, allow and promote the use of Arabic in classrooms where English is not necessitated by the presence of international students. Fifthly, avoid giving preference to 'Western' staff as visible symbols of internationalization at a cost to local staff .

This paper highlights the distinct challenges and experiences of GCC states like Oman in the context of internationalization, differing from Western contexts. These are novel contributions to academic literature, because previous work on lecturer conceptualizations of internationalization in Oman has only taken place in the very different context of private institutions (Al Abry, 2018), and there is limited equivalent literature in other Arab Gulf states. Additionally, it conceptualises decoloniality as an area of implicit practice amongst faculty, who recognise tensions between normative internationalization and local, national and regional forms of identity and knowledge.

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